



LEWES SATURDAY FOLK CLUB

www.lewessaturdayfolkclub.org

Residents: Brad & Carole Chick, Bryan Creer, Dave Earl, Valmai Goodyear, Carole Hanson, Don Morgan, Derek Seed.

Lewes is the county town of East Sussex. It has a Norman castle, a Georgian brewery, a Napoleonic prison, a fierce tradition of blowing things up and at least a dozen folk music events a month, which isn't bad for a place with a population of 16,000 including the outlying villages.

Lewes Saturday Folk Club meets every Saturday night in the Elephant & Castle, White Hill, Lewes BN7 2DJ, stopping only if Christmas or Bonfire fall on a Saturday. We mostly sing and play traditional music from the British Isles but we enjoy other styles as well, particularly those that draw on traditions. We always start off with some dance tunes for anyone with an instrument to join in. We like everyone who wants to sing to have the chance, because we believe strongly that the social aspect of the music is essential, so we encourage floor singers and try to give them confidence. We've been running since 5th. December 1987.

What has made the biggest difference to us is the introduction of all-day workshops with an evening performance by the tutor.

Lewes Saturday Folk Club workshops – 280 and rising

Our workshops started about 24 years ago when the club wanted to book Chris Bartram, the traditional fiddler and singer from Abingdon Morris. In those days the pub we were in had no entertainments licence so we couldn't charge a set entrance fee, and we couldn't make it worth his while travelling to Sussex. He suggested doing a workshop for fiddlers in the daytime, and advertised it a little bit himself. About eight people came to that. We did it again a couple of years later. Then we wanted to book another musician from a distance away, and did the same thing.

One of the Committee got over-excited and suggested booking John Kirkpatrick to do a workshop and evening performance. We thought, being then a very small outfit surviving on hat collections, that his agent would give us a polite or even impolite refusal, but the agent saw the possibilities and took a chance on us. Naturally, the workshop sold out and so did the evening at the folk club. Everyone who came to the workshop was thrilled and inspired. We plucked up courage and asked other singers and players on the same terms. Once we'd advertised workshops with John Kirkpatrick, Tim Laycock, Andy Turner and Cockersdale within a short space of each other, musicians started calling us to offer their services.

Eleven years ago we moved to the Elephant & Castle in Lewes, which has a larger room with better acoustics and a full entertainments licence. We're now putting on fifteen to eighteen all-day workshops a year with top-class musicians who are then the guests at the club in the

evening. There's a full list of past tutors on our website and they've all been good, but the ones who stand out especially vividly are rarities such as Kevin Burke and Tommy Peoples, and others who have been several times such as Martin Carthy, Alistair Anderson, Coope Boyes & Simpson, Tim Laycock, Simon Mayor, Andy Cutting, Sam Sweeney, Rob Harbron, Shirley Collins, Nancy Kerr, James Fagan, Tom McConville, John Spiers, Jeff Warner, Bruce Molsky, and Emmanuel Pariselle. John Kirkpatrick has done the most workshops for us, and, viruses permitting, he should be back in September this year with a full day on instrumental music on Saturday 12th. and a day on singing on Sunday 13th. We're rebooking workshops postponed because of coronavirus – for example, Daoiri Farrell's bouzouki workshop will now be on 24th. April next year.

Ballad forums

A sub-group of the workshops is the all-day ballad forum – six hours of sex and death on licensed premises with an hour for lunch. In advance of the day, participants nominate a traditional ballad to sing and discuss with the group. It's led by a respected performer of ballads (Martin Carthy, Pete Coe, Brian Peters, Chris Coe) who will sing themselves and lead discussion on any aspects of ballads – the history, the style, what drives the plot and motivates the characters, the folklore.

People often make a round trip of a couple of hundred miles for a workshop, coming to the club in the evening and staying in Lewes overnight. Some even travel from abroad. The day runs from 10.45 to 4.45 with an hour for lunch and an afternoon tea break. Pupils spend the day in pleasant, enthusiastic company with a brilliant, inspiring musician. The inspiration that they take away with them is as valuable as the techniques and tips to develop their playing or singing. All our workshops are mixed ability and there is no pressure on anyone to do something they're not ready for, although they will certainly get ideas for things to aim at. Most of them cost £35 for a maximum of twenty people.

Seasonal nights with traditional food

Let's look at some of the other things that make us a bit different. We usually have guest performers with floor singers, but on about twelve Saturdays a year, including all of those in August, we run singarounds. About four of these are linked to a seasonal theme and we take the opportunity of serving traditional food and drink at them. It's very popular and always brings in people who wouldn't normally come to a folk club. We serve harvest loaves and English cheeses and apples at harvest time, in the noble presence of John Barleycorn). In early January we hold a Wassail, with a wassail bowl and Twelfth Cake, a rich cake full of crystallised ginger, peel and rum. We light a blaze of candles and the open fire. We've also devised an indoor wassailing ceremony - people bring branches of their own apple trees which we tie in a bundle, and then fire a comedy shotgun through them while chanting the Wassail rhyme. At the Christmas party we again light the fire and the candles and serve home-made mince pies; we have our own carol book for people to choose a carol for everyone to sing if they don't want to do a party piece. The evening always finishes with 'Shepherds Arise' sung by candlelight and firelight alone. At Easter we serve home-made Easter biscuits. Our Halloween evening brings the candles and the fire again; we serve Soul Cakes, again home-made, and Peter Collins often carves magnificent pumpkin lanterns.

The Lewes Favourites Tunes Practice Sessions

There are a lot of English tunes sessions in Sussex. About twelve years ago, three people (Andy Warburton, who alas is no more, Bryan Creer and Valmai Goodyear) decided that we needed a sort of nursery slope to learn some of the tunes. We made note of the ones that came up most often, bashed them into computer software in the versions that were being played locally, booked a pub room once a month and invited people to join us. It turned out that there was a big demand for this sort of thing and we took the sessions to festivals, notably Chippenham. At first the tunes were copied by what Andy memorably called 'furtive reproduction' (office photocopiers when no-one was looking) but the huge piles of paper got unwieldy and we published them as two books, The Lewes Favourites Volumes 1 and 2. Volume 1, now sold out, inspired Barry Callaghan to produce the national collection 'Hardcore English' for the EFDSS, using the same principle of gathering up the tunes current in sessions up and down the country. We still meet every month to share tunes, playing through them slowly over and over again until they stick, and we think of ourselves as a self-help group rather than a course of instruction. The tunes from Volume 1 can be downloaded in midi and pdf form from the club website.

Concertinas Anonymous

Before the Lewes Favourites got going, Bryan Creer had the bright idea of starting a monthly free session for concertinas only. This was partly so that we could all hear ourselves without melodeons, and also to give people interested in the instruments a chance to find out about the different systems, handle instruments of different quality, and discuss them as well as playing them. We usually spend some time playing three-part arrangements of traditional tunes and songs, some from published collections and some we've perpetrated ourselves.

Monthly tunes sessions at the Volunteer and the John Harvey Tavern

Having learned all the tunes, there are opportunities to play them at full speed in our two monthly tunes sessions. Bryan Creer runs one at the Volunteer, 12 Eastgate Street, Lewes BN7 2LP, on the first Sunday of the month from noon until 2.30 p.m. and there's another which anyone is welcome to run at the John Harvey Tavern, Bear Yard, Lewes BN7 2AN.

Annual Sussex All-Day Singaround, Barcombe

We inherited the running of this about ten years ago when the original organiser, Jerry Jordan, decided to step down and the thought that it would perish caused great dismay. After a change of regime at the Ram we moved to the Royal Oak, Barcombe, East Sussex BN8 5BA. It's held on the third Saturday in January. People travel a long way to take part and it can take three hours to complete the circuit of the room. The atmosphere is warm and the harmonies grow to a beautiful tapestry of sound. Instrumental party pieces and ballads are welcome. We always finish with a generous hour of glorious choruses and there's a tunes session from noon – 3:00 p.m. in the Elephant & Castle on the Sunday.

Shepherds Arise: Old Sussex carols & dance tunes

Eight years ago one of our residents, Stuart Walker, decided to revive the collection of old Sussex West Gallery carols made by Dr. Vic Gammon in the 1980s, and used club regulars as

the main source of singers and musicians. The band includes fiddle, flute, bassoon, clarinet, English concertinas, and a serpent. In our first two years we were delighted and honoured to have Shirley Collins adding her own special magic to the performances as our compere and reader. 'Shepherds Arise' also includes our own arrangements of dance tunes from old Sussex manuscripts held in Barbican House, Lewes, by the Sussex Archaeological Society, and a Sussex mummers' play. We have done five performances to packed houses each winter and look forward to doing more in 2020.

Valmai Goodyear

Lewes Saturday Folk Club committee member

